



Iowa
**Vocational
Rehabilitation**
Services

Finding solutions. Generating success.

Terry E. Branstad, Governor

Kim Reynolds, Lt. Governor

Jason E. Glass, Director,
Department of Education

David Mitchell, Administrator

July 11, 2012

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Hart Senate Office Building, Room 731
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Harkin:

Attached please find written testimony for the HELP Committee field hearing on *The Americans with Disabilities Act at 22: A New Generation of Iowans Approaches the Labor Force with High Expectations*. Hearing is to be held in Cedar Rapids Friday, July 13, 2012.

Sincerely,

IOWA VOCATIONAL
REHABILITATION SERVICES

David L. Mitchell, MS, CRC
Administrator

The Americans with Disabilities Act at 22: A new Generation of Iowans Approaches the Labor Force with High Expectations

Senator Harkin and Committee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity and privilege to share thoughts and practices regarding the positive and life changing impact the Americans with Disabilities Act has had and will continue to have as a new generation of youth with disabilities transitions into the employment environment. My name is David Mitchell and I am the administrator of the Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program in the State of Iowa.

Perhaps no other time in our nation's history has a cohort of students graduated where disability is nothing more than a normal condition in life and technology levels the playing field. Students who are deaf may use video phones and other technologies to interact with the "hearing world" if they haven't had a cochlear implant early in their lives. Students with learning disabilities may access electronic readers so that textbooks are accessible and they can demonstrate their intellect and not their challenges. Robotic chairs now facilitate individuals who are in wheelchairs to stand, move around, and return to a seated position whenever necessary thereby opening traditionally inaccessible jobs. With the enactment of the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) the ingenuity of the American spirit catapulted researchers and developers to consider limitless possibilities, which fueled the hopes and dreams of individuals with disabilities to experience life in a whole new way. It is only natural that high expectations for independence, economic support and full integration into community-based, integrated competitive employment not only occurs, but should be demanded.

Students with disabilities transitioning from secondary to post-secondary environments of living, learning, and working, are native to technology and inspire those of us in the service profession to embrace a vision of the future that had only previously been an idea in a science fiction movie. For these students, the digital divide is nonexistent as they are the first generation to grow up with technology and disability together, and because of the ADA can now realize a future of promise. They are empowered to take control of their destiny and we have the privilege of joining them as we connect with their informed choices.

The informed choices of these students have expanded since the adoption of the American's with Disabilities Act; and as a result opportunities are limited only by the confines of imagination. The combination of the ADA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the Workforce Investment Act facilitated the development of high expectations and aspirations of individuals with disabilities, parents, educators and adult service professionals working with them. This combination provided impetus to

move beyond the status quo and enter a new millennia of human potential... and the youth led the charge.

An example of youth leadership is provided by the Youth Leadership Forum. (YLF) IVRS has been an advocate and partner with the Iowa Department of Human Rights in the delivery of services and programs supporting YLF. The goals of YLF are:

- Young people with disabilities will become employed and self-sufficient;
- Young people with disabilities will be knowledgeable about resources available to them to become successful adults;
- Young people with disabilities will be exposed to professionals with disabilities who are recognized leaders and role models.

YLF is an example of a service delivery program providing leadership training to youth with a set of high expectations impacting service delivery options.

Along with leadership and advocacy comes the need for increased informed choices. The Iowa Department of Education began the discussion of informed choices with the decision to move away from labeling students with disabilities to focusing on their potential as they adopted the “Response to Intervention” to determine eligibility for special education services. This strategy aligned most significantly with the dignity of the student and eliminated disability categories from the educational nomenclature. Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS) was the next organization to respect and embrace this design through the Collaborative Transition Protocol, which allows IVRS to determine eligibility of students with certain disabilities without requiring a categorical educational “label.” Instead the focus is on the strengths and needs of the student. While IVRS continues to categorize the student in the case record as is required by the Federal Regulations and accounting to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), it is no longer the focus for programming and decision-making that it was prior. The impact this has on the staff working with students with disabilities is tremendous and shifts the orientation of early rehabilitation to one of collaboration and partnership with the students and their team. Even though other adult services continue to require the categorization of the individual due to their legislations, which does create challenges for service coordination, many students in transition are expecting service delivery systems to respect their choices and facilitate their employment outcome. IVRS has innovatively developed the Collaborative Transition Protocol and received approval through the Rehabilitation Services Administration to implement the process across the state. We have been working collaboratively with local school districts, vocational rehabilitation field offices and area education agencies to create common understandings as this protocol is implemented. A change in the legislation that might further impact this effort is confirming the ability to accept the

Individual Education Plan (IEP) as documentation that the student has a disability, which would meet the first criterion for VR eligibility. Schools are required to perform a comprehensive evaluation prior to making eligibility determinations for special education services through an individualized education program (IEP). If VR was able to use existing documentation in the IEP for all students it would provide expanded efficiencies and provide opportunities to focus on the strengths and needs of the student.

Employment Outcomes begin with the student and parent expectations, but are influenced by business and industry demands. Prior to the American's with Disabilities Act, individuals with disabilities were viewed as a challenge by business and industry. Concerns over how disability might impact their insurance costs, productivity, and work environment often influenced hiring decisions. Since the inception of the ADA and recent amendments, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation has enthusiastically developed partnerships with business and industry to create a more diverse workforce. This is part of a national trend sponsored and endorsed through the Council on State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) with their National Employment Network. Through the use of paid and unpaid internships, IVRS connects business and industry with qualified job candidates. The results of this service have been promising. At IVRS, sixty-seven percent of individuals with disabilities who participate in this type of training obtain employment and it appears as the training develops more fully this percentage may increase. This service connects business and industry with a job candidate pool that employers did not know existed. In creating these opportunities, businesses are discovering a job candidate pool that has the skills and education to meet their current and future workforce needs.

During the summer of 2012, IVRS will be a lead agency partnering with the Walgreen's Corporation on an Iowa initiative and Walgreen's national initiative to positively impact training and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. A focused, intense occupational skill training program is implemented on-site at the business and engages the individual job candidate with real business practices. Through a combination of community partnerships, vocational rehabilitation planning and counseling and school/family supports, additional opportunities will be provided to help meet the high expectations of competitive, integrated community employment.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in meeting the needs of business and industry is connecting students in transition while they are in high school and before they formulate their post- secondary plans. While there is an IVRS staff person assigned to every high school, there is not enough capacity to serve every student in those high schools. Attempts by IVRS to connect business and industry using a systemic approach through a cooperative agreement were discontinued due to Rehabilitation Services Administration's interpretation of regulations because all students, and not just students

with disabilities, would benefit. So while business and industry desires to connect with students in transition the mechanisms and strategies to do so continue to be isolated with diminishing returns for the business owner because of the inefficiencies created by competing regulations. A broader interpretation of VR transition services that take place prior to or as part of the student's application for VR services should be recognized as part of the VR transition process. These services can be delivered individually, to groups of students with disabilities or to groups containing students with and without disabilities. Activities under this category include, but are not limited to career fairs, orientation meetings with students and families and classroom trainings provided by VR transition staff in collaboration with education staff. Ensuring the option for services to be provided to groups containing students with and without disabilities is consistent with the requirements for services to be provided in the least restrictive environment. This also has the benefit of preparing the future workforce to develop relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds and abilities.

Another challenge in meeting the needs of business is the competing funding needs of various community and organization programs. I firmly support and believe in the role vocational rehabilitation plays in meeting the high expectations of our consumers and business partners and support the role of our RSA Commissioner. The strong partnership and link with the Department of Education ensures vocational rehabilitation is an invited partner to high school staffings and further integrates adult service providers into the transition mix. The qualified vocational rehabilitation counselor has a unique role and creates a positive difference in the delivery of professional services integrating employment needs with the strengths, abilities, and interests of an individual with a disability.

The value of the VR counselor assisting students in developing employment plans is a key to our future workforce and, many times, also requires the use of benefits planning to create a roadmap out of poverty for those students on SSI. The funding and support of complimentary programs such as the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) for VR counselors to use and access qualified benefit planners has been a definite asset in facilitating transition from government benefits to economic independence for many of our state rehabilitation consumers. IVRS, as well as many of our state VR programs, do not have the staff or financial resources to carry out all of the proposed service needs that are necessary for fully effective transition services. The potential loss of these services and the expertise of the people who work in the programs would have a negative impact on all of our consumers, including those in transition.

Iowa has approximately 70,000 special education students with IEP's. Approximately 20,000 of these students would be in the secondary school system. Our current active

case load for all consumers being served by IVRS is 11,482. Our average professional staff person is working with an average of 100 individuals on their case load. IVRS has not been able to match all of our federal monies and in fact, have had 9.5% decreased funding from 2009 with less professional staff and overall personnel. This has resulted in IVRS having a waiting list of approximately 3200 individuals.

Through a focus on innovation, leadership and improved work effectiveness, IVRS has been successful in moving forward with positive transition services. In 2011, 33% of our referrals were from transition students and transition students contributed 38% of our employment outcomes. Our transition outcomes averaged 35 hours per week at an average hourly wage of \$10.78. This compares favorably with the general adult caseload which averaged 33 hours worked per week at an average hourly wage of \$11.48.

Another positive service delivery strategy includes the options of entrepreneurship. IVRS self-employment program is growing and through specialized programming 55 businesses are successfully in operation in 2011 and 172 over a four-year period. IVRS and the federal/state vocational rehabilitation program have proven to be a positive return on investment. Through the provision of vocational rehabilitation services in Iowa, during 2011, individuals with disabilities earned \$15.7 million more than was spent on the entire VR program.

If we are going to fully embrace pre-employment transition services and transition services to students with disabilities, we need line-item funding for transition services, with no state-match requirements and advocacy with our states to remove barriers with filling staff vacancies. Those efforts will enhance our abilities to carry out necessary transition services and better meet the hopes and expectations for services that individuals with disabilities have as well as assist in the carrying out of the promise of the ADA.

This is a team effort involving collaboration and networking from many. IVRS is an active partner with the Iowa Workforce Development Board and is finding creative ways to collaborate in helping problem solve employment gaps in Iowa. Iowa Work Force has recently announced an initiative to help meet the employment gaps being expressed by Iowa businesses and IVRS is integrating strategies to move forward with an integrated employment vision. In 2010 Iowa's workforce had 38% of the job applicant pool competing for jobs defined as "low skills" but there were only 18% of available jobs that required "low skills;" while 50% of the available jobs required "middle skills" and only 33% of the potential applicant pool demonstrated "middle skills". Middle skills are defined as those jobs which require more than a high school diploma, but not a four-year degree. Middle skill education and training can be obtained from employers,

community colleges, apprentice programs, nonprofit community based training organizations and private career schools.¹ Middle skill jobs create a gateway into the middle income brackets for workers. Businesses have demonstrated a need for qualified workers as evidenced by the gap between the numbers of individuals qualified for such jobs and the job market. We believe it is essential that IVRS create these connections for these businesses with students while they are in high school and making life changing decisions regarding their employment future. Imagine the future of the Iowa economy as successful employment connections occur through the provision of effective vocational rehabilitation counseling and training opportunities for students in transition. Creating this road map into the middle class will put those high expectations created by the ADA into reality. The barrier is no longer the attitudes of business and industry, but rather the capacity to make these connections within the confines of regulations and our service delivery system.

IVRS has pockets of excellence in providing these connections. Transition Alliance Programs (TAP) in Iowa has proven, since 1997, to not only stimulate a work orientation in students, but produce employment outcomes. FFY 2011 data on these projects demonstrate that students who participate in TAPs are positively correlated and more likely to:

1. Be competitively employed after graduation from high school; and/or
2. Pursue post-secondary training.

These programs provide students the opportunity to learn about careers, requirements to work in those careers, connect with businesses through work experiences, and develop confidence and skills necessary to contribute to their communities. The Rehabilitation Services Administration Longitudinal Study demonstrated that students who participate in at least two work experiences have a higher propensity toward being competitively employed after high school than students who do not have these experiences. This is also supplemented through various education and transition data. On June 11th and 12th of 2012, I was able to attend and participate in the Iowa Statewide Special Education Conference Program. This was hosted by the Iowa Department of Education and IVRS professionals played a contributing role in training sessions. The Conference was entitled, "Pursuing the Promise". Martin Ikeda, Ph.D., Bureau Chief and State Director of Special Education (school-aged), Iowa Department of Education, facilitated the state conference and noted in his opening remarks that "if we are truly going to deliver on the promises of educational equity made a generation ago, we need to do something more, and we need to do it together. Every child in the Iowa public school system deserves to make a year's growth in a year's time, and to have a team of caring individuals working together to prepare that child for life after high school." "Pursuing the Promise" was an opportunity to discuss how to deliver on high

expectations for those involved in the transition of our youth. One of the presenters was a young man named Tyler who has a disability and had graduated from the Waterloo School District in Iowa and is now in his fourth year of college. Tyler's dream is to change the way the world interacts with people with disabilities and his approach has focused on the individual's strengths and abilities, what they can do. This approach provides opportunities for us to use the foundation of the ADA, to ask how we can improve employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities and recognize the need to do things differently now than what we have done in the past and to do so with a sense of urgency. Much like the high expectations being experienced through the foundation of the ADA, we need to have high expectations regarding our secondary and post-secondary training opportunities for individuals with disabilities. IVRS is carrying forward the conversation of collaboration and partnering at the local school district level and recognizes the vital role families, youth, teachers, community programs and vocational rehabilitation have in effective transition planning and implementation. The integration of work and work experiences should be an education intervention and as quoted in one of the sessions by Dr. Richard Luecking, President of TransCen, Inc. "all kinds of amazing things happen based upon what is learned in work experiences."

Work experiences connect the IDEA and Rehabilitation Act requirements of Transition with the high school experience. The focus of those two pieces of legislation in Transition is about creating a meaningful experience, where students understand what it is they are learning has practical applications for their future. By weaving together the work experiences with the classroom environment students experience a meaningful course of study and businesses in Iowa benefit.

One nationally recognized program that coordinates classroom curriculum with business requirements is Project Search, which IVRS will be implementing in the Des Moines School District in the fall of 2012. IVRS is also partnering through the leadership of one of our community rehabilitation providers, North Iowa Vocational Center, a Project Search in Mason City, Iowa which is now going on its second year of operation. The Mason City Project Search is serving eight individuals. The Des Moines Project is anticipating serving 13 students during its first year of operation. Students, who meet the level of eligibility criteria to be considered the most significantly disabled, will attend high school at a local hospital where they will learn the skills necessary to work in a variety of occupations that occur in that type of environment. Through their work experience, coordinated with their classroom academics that are taught at the business setting, these students develop confidence and understand the connection between school and work. This partnership between IVRS, the local school district, a community rehabilitation provider and a major employer in the area will create opportunities for these students who as they transition, will become employed in a "middle skill" industry

and develop a foundation for a promising employment career. High expectations drive the planning for these types of programs and these practices have developed with the birth and aging of the ADA.

Entrance into the middle class is the expected outcome from the IVRS Blueprint for Change created in 2011. This was developed through review of research and agency data to create the IVRS Blueprint for Change identifying seven expectations of results that will transform the Iowa Rehabilitation Services Bureau within 10 years. Those expectations, which when put into practice locally, are measured by the success of the individuals with disabilities obtaining employment. Those seven expectations are:

1. Be the undisputed authority on connecting individuals with disabilities to employment.
2. Engage and inspire our job candidates, partners, and business community.
3. Ignite the human potential of our job candidates and business partners as they connect.
4. Expand the opportunities of individuals with disabilities while connecting to and supporting our businesses with qualified job candidates.
5. Be a leader in ethical service delivery.
6. Create innovative employment services worthy of our job candidates and needed by our business partners.
7. Demonstrate an accountable and sustainable employment services model.ⁱⁱ

As a result of this blueprint, IVRS staff are creating employer accounts and has seen an increase in businesses and industries that are contacting IVRS to hire qualified job candidates. An example of an innovative practice occurring in many states, Iowa included, is a project with Manpower Staffing to access business accounts that only hire permanent employees through them. In addition, conversations with community partners and county governments are stimulating ideas for programs to serve the chronic mentally ill in a manner that pre-emptively strives to create employment connections for this population before they go on Social Security benefits. If we are able to reach out and provide services prior to creating dependency on benefits or consider alternative ways to integrate an employment vision based upon a foundation of benefits that can meet maintenance needs and allow for participation in occupational skill training, we can begin to positively impact the employment cycle. Through the day to day operations, IVRS staff is being given the authority to identify and develop solutions on processes and policies that impede employment of individuals with disabilities. The synergy from the ADA puts these blueprint activities into practice that prior to the ADA would never have been realized.

In high schools, IVRS staff work with local educators to implement the Transition Vision jointly developed with Local Education Agencies to work more cohesively together to serve students, while minimizing duplication of services. While each local district is in varying levels of implementation of that vision, together they are focused on creating a system that creates a seamless experience for the student. Perhaps the greatest opportunity for improvement in this vision is the infusion of business expectations and the self-advocacy of employment rights.

In considering the employment climate and the attitudinal barriers prior to the enactment of the ADA in comparison to where we are today, it is clear that the winds have changed. Businesses want and need to be able to link to this new diverse workforce. Iowa continues to have a challenge in promoting a community-based, integrated competitive employment vision across all of our state-wide employment programs. IVRS has taken a lead role in promoting and implementing The Employment First Initiative, which challenges everyone to consider competitive, integrated community based employment before any other type of post-school sheltered employment activity. This cause may speak more to the attitudes of the professionals in the industry and those who grew up prior to living their lives under the ADA, than to the students with disabilities who are looking forward to a brighter and promising future, where they will have full access to integrated community employment. There is still work to be done to fulfill this promise.

This past school year graduated for the first time, students with disabilities who grew up knowing that employment in the community was not a luxury but a right. While there remain obstacles to achieve this vision, there is optimism in what has been accomplished and hope on what might be yet to come:

- Continued diligence of professionals focusing on the possibility and not allowing policy barriers to be experienced by the individual is essential to achieving full inclusion.
- Creating business relationships so information can inform the counseling discussions with students in transition so their informed choice expands their horizons and thereby changes the landscape of the Iowa economy.
- Celebrating the uniqueness of all individuals through a comprehensive understanding of abilities and assets and finding ways to integrate those with the future workforce needs of business will create change.
- Creating capacity through system development that encourages integration and recognizes that through interaction the barriers become only perceived and more easily eliminated.

- Celebrating the human connection of every student, utilizing strategies to unlock their unique potential, encourages a fully integrated workforce.
- Creating connections between educators and the business community to inform the educational system and raise the academic skill sets of all students.

The American's with Disabilities Act had a vision for the American workforce. No other single legislation had as much impact on uniting the American business community in a call to full employment. Collectively with the IDEA and WIA the trifecta is the success of the American enterprise and the hope of tomorrow's workforce. We can aspire and make the future we seek.

ⁱ Middle-Skill Jobs in Iowa, May 2012, Labor Force and Occupational Analysis Bureau, Iowa Workforce Development

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Onward, by Howard Schultz